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SENSITIVE

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SUBJECT: COTE D'IVOIRE: TOXIC WASTE SCANDAL UNFOLDS

REF: ABIDJAN 997

¶1. (U) Summary. The illegal dumping of toxic waste at eleven open-air garbage sites around the city of Abidjan has reportedly left three people dead and led some 1,500 others to seek treatment for symptoms of nausea, rashes, fainting, diarrhea and headaches. The dumping has generated public protests and led to the resignation of Prime Minister Banny's government (reftel). End summary.

¶2. (U) According to press reports, on August 19, 2006, the Probo Koala, a ship owned by Greek company Prime Marine Management, based in Russia, flying a Panamanian flag and chartered by Dutch oil firm Trafigura Beheer BV, docked at the port of Abidjan at the wharf of the national oil company, PETROCI, to empty and clean the ship, or "unload slops. 8 PETROCI approved the request after Trafigura had reportedly indicated the chemical nature of the slops and requested necessary preparations at the port for removal. A private local disposal company, Tommy de Raphael Zadi Dacoury, a subsidiary of the Puma Energy Group, was hired to unload the slops through WAIBS, a local shipping agent. Over a period of 48 hours, disposal trucks dumped 528 cubic meters of toxic waste in eight open-air dumping sites around Abidjan in the districts of Vridi, Plateau Dokui, Akouedo and into the lagoon bordering the south side of Abidjan.

¶3. (U) Both Prime Marine Management and Trafigura claim the discharge of material from the ship was legal and it was up to the local company, Tommy, to ensure safe handling of the waste. In an email dated August 17, a copy of which was provided to us by the Government of Cote d'Ivoire (GOCI), Trafigura explicitly states to the Deputy General Administrator of the Puma Energy Group that the slops on board are "chemical" and adds: "Please note that slops on board are a mix of gasoline with caustic soda and high concentration of Mercaptan Sulfur...please confirm that you can arrange for removal and disposal of these slops and obtain proper documentation from slop removal company (sic) about compliance with local regulations by environmental administration and customs on disposal of these slops." As companies involved in unloading slops need prior authorizations from the Ministry of the Environment, the Ministry of Transport and the port of Abidjan, it is not clear how a toxic load could have gained routine disposal approval.

¶4. (U) Inhabitants of Plateau-Dokui, Treichville, Marcory, Koumassi, Port-Bouet, and Vridi phoned the Ivorian Anti-Pollution Center (CIAPOL), and complained of a "suffocating odor. 8 CIAPOL ordered the commander of Probo Koala to hold the ship until further notice so that CIAPOL could carry out checks and tests on the waste product. In spite of the order, the ship left Abidjan on August 22. Samples of the waste tested by both the Ivorian refinery

company, SIR, and CIAPOL reveal that it contained hydrogen sulfide and organochloride, both poisonous.

¶5. (U) The Ministry of Health and Public Hygiene has urged victims to seek treatment at the Treichville Teaching hospital, the Cocody Teaching hospital, the Yopougon Teaching hospital and various health centers in the district of Abidjan.

¶6. (U) On September 6 the Ambassador received a letter from the Minister of Planning and Development, urgently requesting assistance from the international community to definitively identify the toxic substances, neutralize their effect on the environment, test those affected for contamination, treat the victims, and put in place a health and environmental alert system.

¶7. (SBU) Comment: Although it occurred several weeks ago, the controversy over the dumping has only heated up over the last few days. The public is understandably outraged and looking to assess blame. The likeliest candidates, several of whom have been professing their innocence, include the Director of the Port of Abidjan (an FPI member and close associate of President Gbagbo), the Governor of the District of Abidjan (another FPI member), the Minister of Transportation (leader of the opposition MFA party), the Minister of Environment (member of the PIT party), and the Director of Customs. The G-7 opposition parties have issued a statement denouncing the "irresponsibility of certain authorities" and calling for an international and independent inquiry into the affair. The FN have also issued their own critical, and alarmist, communiqué.
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